

Sermon on Luke 4:21-30  
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

It seemed to have started so well – that first sermon of Jesus, in his home town of Nazareth. Then Jesus finished reading that passage from Isaiah about freedom, and said “*today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,*” everyone in the synagogue spoke well of him. Like a Greek chorus, they were all amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. This is where we left off last Sunday, with everyone “feeling good” about what they had heard from Jesus.

Then it all went south, with a seemingly innocent comment that they all made to each other: “*Isn’t this Joseph’s son?*” We don’t know what they meant by that. Was it just an innocent question clarifying Jesus’ identity, as someone they knew? Or was it something more than that? Did they mean to say “how could such gracious words come from the son of a *carpenter?*” Like the old axiom, which the prospective disciple Nathanael had asked in John’s gospel, when Philip invited him to meet Jesus, a prophet from Nazareth – “*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” Maybe it’s like one of us city slickers from Minnesota asking if anything good can come out of Fargo, North Dakota (why not Minot?), or when invited to hear the “new act” from Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

But I don’t think questions about him being Joseph’s son would have set Jesus off. Possibly he sensed some hostility from his audience, an unwillingness to receive the Word from someone so familiar. Maybe there was something else that triggered a reaction out of Jesus, but Luke doesn’t tell us what it was. There is no clue in the sermon Jesus was preaching on this passage from Isaiah that tells us why Jesus said what he did next. There is only the fact that Jesus had come out of his wilderness trials and arrived in Galilee, where he preached in all the synagogues on his way to Nazareth, and word had spread about his preaching. According to the other gospels, Jesus was preaching, healing and performing miracles, and maybe the good people of Nazareth were getting impatient to see some great miracle of healing that this Jesus would perform *for them!* From what happened next, and from what Jesus said, this is very likely.

Because he said what was plainly on their minds: “*You will say, do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum*” (down by the sea). Heal somebody! Cast out a demon, already! Then he said the obvious truth about the dynamics of the situation: “*Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.*” It’s the idea that people find it so much harder to hear the truth spoken from their own kin, neighbor, or friend. Sometimes it takes an *outsider* to tell us the truth, with authority, for us to accept it. From

someone we know too well, or steps outside their role, we might ask, “*Who do you think you are, telling me what’s what? I knew you when you were just a kid!*”

So then Jesus really got on a roll, quoting Old Testament scripture about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, when *only foreigners were healed by God’s prophets!* When there was a famine in the land, there were many widows in Israel, but God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow in the foreign city of Sidon, who shared with Elijah her last morsel of food, and so she and her son were saved from starvation. And then there was that general called Naaman, who was a *Syrian* of all things, who had defeated the Israelites in battle and even had an Israelite servant girl, whom the prophet Elisha had healed of his leprosy, as commanded by God (against Elisha’s better judgment)! So – no miracles for the people of Nazareth, by their own neighbor Jesus, only the truth, that God often sent prophets to do miracles for *foreigners* instead of *God’s own chosen people* – which the men of Nazareth took as a great insult. So they were enraged, pushed him out of the synagogue, dragged him out of town and to the edge of a cliff, to throw him off the side. But for some reason they didn’t finish the job (which is a very good thing, because that would be a very short gospel according to Luke if they had!). So Jesus walked through the midst of them and went on his way – all the way to Capernaum, where he would teach in *their* synagogue and cast an evil spirit out of a man who was possessed, and healed Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever. So what did Capernaum have that Nazareth didn’t have? I don’t know, but now they had Jesus, very much alive, and doing miracles! We don’t know if Jesus ever visited Nazareth again.

I don’t want to dwell on the poor people of Nazareth, who never got to enjoy the fame of their home town hero or witness an actual miracle from his hands. Jesus was not the bringer of a *Traveling Salvation Show*. The mistake the people made in that synagogue of Nazareth was the *sin of feeling entitled*. And that is where the gospel meets us today, you and me, in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer (or any Christian church in America)! Because, truth be told, don’t you and I really think that if Jesus were to show up to preach here today, that he would preach some powerful words of healing and affirmation because of our faith? Haven’t we hung in there, for 125 faithful years, through thick and thin, a Great Depression, the Great White Flight to the suburbs, and a multitude of blizzards? Well, maybe we wouldn’t expect Jesus to actually praise us for our faith – but we wouldn’t mind the usual Lutheran sermon of sin and grace! And wouldn’t we expect at least a teeny, tiny miracle, at long last? Some kind of sign in response to all those centuries that Christians have gone without a visible sign of Jesus’ power, with only the gospel stories of what *other* people got to witness over 2000 years ago, and not us? Don’t we also feel somewhat entitled, just like the good people of Nazareth – who helped raise that precocious Jesus kid from the beginning?

But no, we are not “*entitled*” to anything like that. Because the good news of God’s amazing grace, the gift of the gospel, and miracles of healing always come as a *surprise*, as a gift from God, to people who never have an inkling of expectation that something good could ever happen to them! (Sometimes the gift of healing or of good news even comes to us – but it’s always a surprise!)

Then there’s that other sin of the Nazarenes – being offended when *foreigners* experience the miracles of God, before they do. I wonder if this is a sin that we share? Today there is a lot of tension in the public discourse of our nation (and in the world) about foreigners fleeing conflict in their own countries, and seeking refuge in new lands. Should they be welcome here, among us - especially if they aren’t Christian, if they are Muslim, associated with the religion professed by the extremists (whom we fear)? But what happens when God uses the foreigners we don’t understand, from south of the border or across the oceans, to teach us something about compassion and grace? The result is that we may feel convicted, and be moved to change our point of view – or we harden our hearts, and lash out at those whom we do not understand. I guess that’s the choice we have – in the coming presidential elections, and as Christians of the Church.

I guess the preacher’s instinct is to end the sermon with some good news – but it’s hard to do with a gospel passage such as we have today. We end the story feeling disturbed by the people’s angry response to Jesus’ preaching, and even more disturbed by the words that came from Jesus’ mouth! We can be inspired only by the insight that Jesus gives into the heart of God: God’s priority in granting healing and the gift of salvation to whoever needs it most – whether they be God’s own chosen faithful (either Israelite or Lutheran!), or the most pagan of all foreigners! Wherever God finds suffering, or faith, or openness to the gifts of God, by whatever name, that is where salvation comes! And Jesus’ gift is the courage and willingness to share this truth, even at the expense of the good will of his own kin, his own neighbors from his own hometown. Even at the distress of his own faithful disciples and followers, Jesus speaks the truth of God! Perhaps that’s the good news today! It’s the good news that disturbs us, the truth of our own sin, our own feelings of entitlement, which get in the way of the good news, barriers to our own salvation! It’s the truth of God’s love, which passes all our understanding.

So, hard lessons are seldom popular, except in hindsight. The truth usually disturbs us too much when we first hear it! But hard truths that disturb us are the only way we grow! Without tension, there is no resolution; without conflict there is no true peace. The tension of truth can bring us clarity, if we look for it, instead of just being stubborn – like the people of Nazareth, who struck out in anger at what Jesus said, instead of asking what he meant, and seeking to learn from him something about God’s love for all people – foreigners included. So today Jesus

invites you and me to open our hearts to a new way of thinking, and to embrace the truth of God that Jesus presents to us, for which he died – to give life to the world!